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**Scholarly publishing:  
The challenges facing the  
African university press**

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*"It is the noble duty of a university to advance knowledge and to diffuse it not merely among those who can attend daily lectures but far and wide"*

Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of John Hopkins University,  
Journal of Scholarly Publishing, January 2001

*"The bottom line is that scholarly publishing isn't financially feasible as a business model — never was, never was intended to be, and should not be. If scholarship paid, we wouldn't need university presses"*

Cathy N. Davidson, The Chronicle of Higher Education, October 3, 2003

*"It undermines all we stand for as a profession if the only way scholarly presses can survive is by looking for books that sell. French history is less valuable than Latin American history because it doesn't sell as well? That's preposterous"*

Cathy N. Davidson, The Chronicle of Higher Education, October 3, 2003

*"Just as we expend no effort on deciding whether or not there should be an English department, a mathematics department, or a public relations office, so perhaps we should take the presence of a university press within our university community as a natural component of a fully rounded community of scholars"*

Colin Day, The university press: an organic part of the institution' in Scholarly Publishing, October 1991, '

## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to examine the challenges that face the university press in Africa in general and South Africa in particular. It will start by examining the state of the university press in Africa, the state of the university press in South Africa, the challenges that face university presses, such as the declining purchasing of scholarly monographs by university libraries since the budgets of most university libraries are now spend on subscribing to expensive journals and serials, poorly paid academic staff that does not purchase scholarly books, poor teaching and research infrastructure where the course pack has replaced the monograph in the classroom, a generally under-developed market, a weakly developed reading culture, short print-runs which are not economically viable, lack of distribution hubs such as bookshops and lack of intra-Africa book trade. Whereas in the past scholarly publishers could sell between 1000 and 1500 copies of a monograph, today they sell between 200-300 copies. Since publishing small print runs is not economically viable due to economies of scale, scholarly publishers are caught between a declining market and high costs involved in publishing small print runs. It will further examine the role that research institutes and science councils play in scholarly publishing and lastly it will examine the opportunities that new modes of communications offers to scholarly publishers.

## **Introduction**

There is a preponderance to generally lump scholarly and academic publishing together as though the two are the same. Nonetheless it needs to be categorically stated that scholarly and academic publishing are not the same thing. It is therefore prudent to start by examining exactly what is scholarly publishing. The following constitutes scholarly publishing/outputs:

- 1) peer-reviewed journal articles
- 2) peer-reviewed monographs
- 3) peer-reviewed conference proceedings
- 4) peer-reviewed research-based books

Academic publishing mostly comprises the publishing of non-research based university textbooks meant for teaching. What then distinguishes scholarly books from other types of books?

Scholarly books can be defined as follows:

- 1) An extensive and scholarly treatment of a topic by one or more scholars, largely comprising significant and original research, embedded in relevant literature
- 2) An extensive scholarly exposition by one or more scholars of the available literature on a topic, from a position of demonstrable authority, which makes a significant conceptual or empirical synthesis that advances scholarship
- 3) A collected book, assembled by one or more scholars in a field or group of related fields, which as a planned group of individually peer-reviewed chapters by appropriately qualified authors generates a new conceptual synthesis that advances scholarship; and
- 4) A collective work assembled by one or more scholars in a number of related fields, in which the individual authors have noted and reviewed each other's chapters and adapted their contributions to generate a new conceptual synthesis that significantly advances scholarship.<sup>i</sup>

## **The role of the university library in scholarly publishing**

The university libraries have been the principal market for the products of university press.<sup>ii</sup> They continue to be the cornerstone of scholarly publishing as the university libraries have been the largest buyers of scholarly books from university presses. Scholars write books, university presses publish them, university libraries buys them, and other scholars read them to produce new

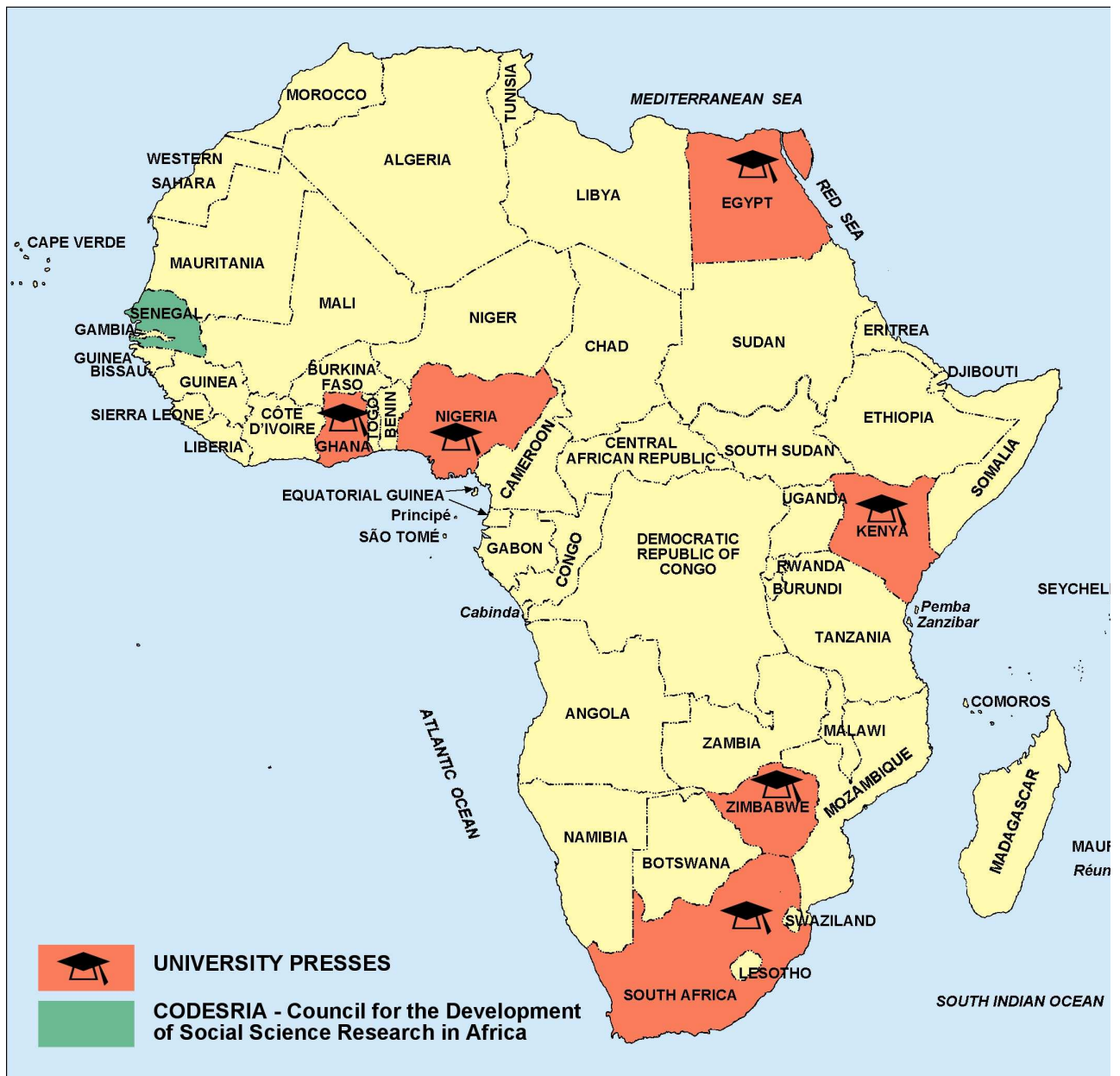
knowledge/research. However, since university libraries have been experiencing budget cuts, scholarly publishing has suffered as a result as libraries have now cut down on their purchase of scholarly books in favour of subscribing to journals and other serials. The university press is thus losing its biggest customer. Whereas in the past scholarly publishers could sell between 1000 and 1500 copies of a monograph, today they sell between 200-300 copies. Since publishing small print runs is not economically viable due to economies of scale, scholarly publishers are caught between a declining market and high costs involved in publishing small print runs. In many instances university presses have not only been experiencing low sales volumes to university libraries but they have also experienced budget cuts from their parent universities. Moreover, since the university environment has been corporatized and managerialised, pressure has been brought to bear on the university press to operate as a profit-making entity thereby impacting negatively on what the university press can publish or not publish.

Since scholarly books generally do not sell high volumes as they are highly specialized and suffer from economies of scale, meaning since scholarly publishers normally depend on small print-runs, many university presses have therefore been forced to diversify their publishing lists and publish non-scholarly but profitable titles in order to keep themselves afloat. Some scholars have argued that since monographs have low circulation rates, electronic publishing would be more efficient in reaching the market and reducing the costs of production, distribution and inventory.<sup>iii</sup>

Furthermore, since the university press is expected to turn a profit, in line with the neo-liberal mantra of its parent university, many scholarly books are turned down on the basis that they are not financially viable. Commercial considerations now far outweigh the quality of scholarship, meaning that the fact that a book is of superior quality in terms of scholarship is not a guarantee that it will be published. Publishing decisions are mostly based on how profitable a title will be. Scholarly publishing has become one of the mostly contested terrains on which the logics of two different worlds – that of the business of publishing and the academy – have come together and are colliding violently.

The university press seeks to fulfill the university's mission of serving the public good through education. Publishing is a cultural enterprise. From a business point of view, publishing could be regarded as a manufacturing enterprise.

## The university press in Africa



Map illustrating where university presses are found in Africa



Book manufacturing:

- 1) Idea(s) generates new idea(s)
- 2) a manuscript is produced and submitted to a publisher
- 3) a publisher gets the manuscript peer-reviewed and is accepted for publication
- 4) manuscript is put into production and money is invested
  - 4.1 copy-editing
  - 4.2 proof-reading
  - 4.3 typesetting
  - 4.4 printing
  - 4.5 distribution
- 5) book is published
- 6) libraries and booksellers place orders
- 7) the public reads and/or buys.

The contribution of Africa to world book output is in the region of 2%.<sup>iv</sup> About 98% of that 2% comprises of school or what others refers to as educational books. This means that not only is African publishing still in its infancy but it is minuscule. Africa imports the great majority of its books, mostly from Europe and the United States, and produces only 2% of the world's books whilst accounting for 12% of the world population. The limited overall book market on the continent is also negatively influenced by high levels of taxation (duties and sales taxes), poorly organized retail systems, first language diversity, and sectoral inflationary pressures.<sup>v</sup>

Despite this negative picture, the African publishing industry is growing not only in the textbook sector but also in the general book market. Scholarly publishing is only able to flourish in an environment where there is a sustained and robust production of knowledge, meaning a thriving research environment. Unfortunately, it is now well-known that Africa's scientific output, as measured by articles in Thomson ISI databases, has been steadily declining in the recent past, both in absolute terms and as a share of world output.<sup>vi</sup>

Publishing on the African continent is predominantly educational because of government spending. This is even so in the most developed publishing industries such as South Africa and Egypt. In South Africa for example, though the publishing industry is not wholly dependent on educational publishing, it still remains the dominant sector.

Unfortunately, since scholarly books require a significantly higher risk investment than other types of books due to unfavourable economies of scale, this has resulted in the closing down of most university presses on the continent at best, at worst most remain moribund. This has resulted in fewer titles being published by the university presses as well as a move towards 'diversification' resulting in the proliferation of either school book or university textbook publishing by university presses. In some instances, university presses have had to publish books other than scholarly books in order to survive financially

Whereas in the United States and Europe, most universities have university press, in Africa the university press is an exception rather than the rule. Most leading universities in the United States have a university press. See appendix A. Many universities on the African continent do not have university presses. The United Kingdom for example has some of the world's most acclaimed university presses, such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Liverpool University Press and Manchester University Press.

In East Africa, university presses are found at Nairobi and MOI Universities. In West Africa, Nigeria and Ghana set the pace in terms of university presses. In Ghana, three universities came together to establish the Ghana Universities Press. In Nigeria, a country with more than 80 universities, including both government and private, few have ventured into scholarly publishing and their role is more that of a service provider than a scholarly publisher. Among those that have are Ibadan, Lagos, Obafemi Awolowo and Maiduguri, for example. In Nigeria, although there is a large number of universities, only a few university presses exist

In some instances, university presses on the African continent have been reduced to publishing school or educational books due to low or non-existent markets, such as the University of Nairobi Press in Kenya. The University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania has decided to retain its publishing capacity but the University of Nairobi Press in Kenya, while still operating has not produced many scholarly publications. In Nairobi the East African Educational Publishers (EAEP) and Action Publishers are filling the gap in the scholarly publications market.

In southern Africa for example, none of the following countries have a university press, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland; and Mozambique. In Zimbabwe

there are five tertiary institutions, namely, University of Zimbabwe, National University of Science and Technology, Africa University, Solisi and Open University and none have a press.

Since the market for scholarly books is miniscule, most university presses where they exist have had to diversify their publishing lists in order to be profitable. Some have ventured into academic, trade or even educational publishing which is a departure from their core business.

The university press is crucial since its role is to publish scholarly books which would not be published by commercial publishing houses due to their limited market. University presses publishes books that are of immense scholarly value but are destitute of commercial value. The university press therefore acts as a facilitator of the growth of scholarly publishing. The non-existence of university presses in many African universities means the African academic lacks scholarly publishing outlets.

## **The university press in South Africa**

In South Africa, there are 23 public universities, comprising of 17 universities and 6 universities of technology. However, there are only five active university presses, namely:

- 1) Witwatersrand University Press in Johannesburg, Gauteng
- 2) University of Cape Town Press in Cape Town, Western Cape
- 3) University of Kwazulu-Natal Press in Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu-Natal
- 4) University of Pretoria Law Press in Pretoria, Gauteng
- 5) University of South Africa Press in Pretoria, Gauteng

University of Pretoria Law Press is very small and publishes only law materials. University of Cape Town Press (UCT Press) in Cape Town is now wholly owned by Juta publishers, a commercial publishing house which is one of the oldest indigenous publishing houses.

In South Africa the publishing of journal articles represent over 90% of the publication output referred to as scholarly publications. Scholarly books and conference proceedings make up the remaining 10%. It could therefore be argued that since the majority of journals are published by scholarly societies and research council this helps explain why there are so few university presses.



The recent subsidies awarded for book outputs under the policy of the department of education has shown that there is a significant increase in subsidy units earned for books and book chapters (from 201 in 2004 to 331 in 2006). While this is the highest percentage increase for any of the three categories listed, subsidies awarded for books and book chapters still constitute only 4% of total subsidies awarded. The bulk of subsidies, 96% in 2006 were awarded for journal articles. However, it is now widely accepted that books and chapters in collected works in the social sciences and humanities are valued highly and recognized as essential modes of knowledge dissemination in these fields than journal articles.

In the natural sciences, journal articles tend to be rated highly than other modes of dissemination such as books. Books in the social sciences and humanities generate on average three times more citations than do journal articles in the same fields. (*Scholarly books: their production, use and evaluation in South Africa today*, ASSAf, 2009). We are therefore tempted to ask but why are books more frequently cited? Three factors may be significant:

- 1) Books generally encompass a broader scope than do typical articles;
- 2) The subject matter may also be *en vogue* in that marketable/topical books are considered for publishing; and
- 3) Books tend to be written for a wider audience, and therefore have a larger catchment of potential citers. (*Scholarly books: their production, use and evaluation in South Africa today, ASSAf, 2009*).

It should be emphasised though that academics generally publish first in journals, often articles based on their doctoral research, and also chapters in edited volumes, before embarking on publishing major monographs. Therefore, they will likely publish a mixture of journal articles and books. But the two kinds of publishing are intricately linked and mutually dependent, and academics need both. In many African countries, the weakness of journal publishing have a direct impact on the weakness of scholarly book publishing (an undeveloped culture of peer review, younger authors not encouraged to publish early in journals etc). In the electronic era, journals and book publishing are becoming ever closer, moving to a situation where book chapters will likely have similar models of dissemination as electronically published journal articles.

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There is now a realization that the weighting of books and journal articles need to be revisited. The weighting of a book relative to a journal article should be upgraded. An entire book of at least 180,000 words must be weighted as having a value 10 times that of a single journal article, one of 120,000 words as having 7.5% times that value, and 60,000, five times, in proper recognition of the special scholarly contribution of book-based publications.

Since chapters in edited volumes will be required to be individually reviewed by appropriate peers, as well as subjected to review as 'components of the whole' by editors and (in one type) co-authors, there is no reason to see them as having intrinsically less value than journal articles.

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South African universities are directly rewarded for the number of publications in accredited journals that their staff produce. This system was established in 1985 by the then National Department of Education as a way of incentivising South African science amidst its growing international (including scientific) isolation. The original system entailed that research publications (articles in peer-reviewed journals, books, chapters in books and peer-reviewed conference proceedings and research reports) by South African academics (with an address at a university) qualify for a subsidy to be determined each year as part of the "block subsidy" granted to each of the public higher education institutions. Articles were subsidized if they appear in a list of accredited journals. (Source: Mouton, J. (2009), *The State of Social Science in Sub-Saharan Africa*)

In September 2003, the Department of Education published a revised policy on SA research output – "Policy and Procedures for the Measurement of Research Output for Public Higher Education Institutions", which came into effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 2005 for the 2004 research outputs. The policy listed the following journal categories as qualifying for subsidy purposes. Journals listed in the following:

- 1) The Sciences Citation Index of the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI)
- 2) The Social Sciences Citation Index of the ISI
- 3) The Arts and Humanities Citation Index of the ISI
- 4) The International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS)
- 5) The Department of Education (DoE), List of Approved South African Journals

(Source: Mouton, J. (2009), *The State of Social Science in Sub-Saharan Africa*)

The most plausible explanation for the substantive growth in output since 2004 must be found in the huge increase in monetary values to be earned by such units. Many universities have subsequently also increased the monetary amounts that are passed on to individual authors as reward for publishing in accredited journals further encouraging production. In fact there is some emerging evidence that those institutions that pay the higher amounts of these subsidies into the research accounts of their staff are amongst the universities recording the highest growth rates in article production.

### **Challenges facing the university press**

Many university presses are struggling financially due to the following:

- 1) Low university library budgets
- 2) A generally under-developed market
- 3) Generally impoverished university staff
- 4) A weakly developed reading culture
- 5) Short print-runs which are not economically viable
- 6) Lack of distribution hubs such as bookshops
- 7) Lack of intra-Africa book trade

Across the continent bookshops do not stock up on scholarly books but mostly prescribed educational and university textbooks. African university presses also face other challenges such as overcoming the burden of economic problems, political instability and unemployment to mention just a few. It is my contention therefore that the move towards commercializing university presses, which are the cradle of scholarly expression pose a serious threat to the growth of scholarly publishing in Africa.

Scholarly publishing on the African continent has also suffered from lack of government funding, oppressive political environments, which have resulted in the sad fact that the majority of Africa's scholars have migrated and are making their living in countries other than their own across Africa and outside the continent and their outputs are then claimed as products of their adopted countries.

Most African universities are impoverished, and so are the lecturers (this is one of a plethora of the push factors) and most universities in the United States, Europe and the Diaspora have superior facilities (this is one of a plethora of pull factors). This has resulted in what we know today as the brain drain.

However over and above some of these challenges, the scholarly publishing crisis is exacerbated by the rapidly increasing prices for science, technical and medical journals that are published by commercial publishers.<sup>viii</sup>

## **The role of research institutes in scholarly publishing in Africa**

To all intents and purposes, research institutes and science councils have been in the forefront of scholarly publishing. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar, Senegal and the Human Sciences Research Council Press (HSRC Press) in Cape Town, South Africa are cases in point. The latter is able to do so due to the fact that it is subsidized by the state and therefore does not publish for gain but uses what we call a 'cost recovery model' and makes its books available for free on-line. Other science councils such as the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA), and research institutes such as the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR), the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) have immensely contributed to the literature, largely due to the fact that since they are donor and government funded they can operate on a 'cost-recovery model' free of the vagaries of commercial enterprise.

The scholarly publishing sector in Africa remains small and therefore in a very precarious situation. Given the precarious nature in which scholarly publishers find themselves, their role has been usurped by academic and educational publishers, in some instances. Elsewhere on the continent, the contribution of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) from West Africa, the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) in scholarly publishing cannot be over-emphasised. The two have published a number of important monographs and books which would otherwise not have been published by commercial publishers.

## **Opportunities provided by new modes of communication**

There is quite a substantial number of African journals that are not published online. The African Journals Online (AJOL) initiative is one of such initiatives meant to make sure that African research reach as wide an audience as it possibly can. One of the major challenge facing scholarly publishers generally, and university presses in particular is the fact that since distribution channels are so weak scholarly research has remained largely 'invisible'. This is espe-



cially so in respect of the book. Since most journals are now published electronically, they can be assessed from anywhere in the world.

How then can the challenges of book distribution be overcome? How can we make books more accessible? We can make books more accessible through alternative publishing models. The following suggestions are by no means exhaustive. We can mitigate these challenges through electronic publishing which helps mitigate against most of the challenges illustrated above (all you need is the hardware, internet connectivity and energy). The HSRC model has proven to be successful in this regard. The other way would be through print-on-demand technologies. So that instead of keeping unsold stock we will print to order. Lastly, we could also try and mitigate these through co-publishing which is a model that allows publishers from different parts of the world to publish a book jointly so that a title is then made available to different markets by publishers in the respective territories.

## **Conclusion**

In order for scholarly publishing to thrive on the African continent, there is a need to revive and strengthen the university press.

- 1) Firstly, the university press needs to be funded by the parent university in order to circumvent the unfortunate phenomenon of having African books being published abroad and then failing to reach home due to exorbitant costs. And when they do reach home they are to all intents and purposes unaffordable.

We need to arrest the phenomenon wherein we send raw materials (manuscripts) to Europe and the United States where they are processed into final products (books) and then having them resold to us at a higher cost.

I am not advocating for a narrow idealistic boycott of European and United States publishers but I strongly believe that co-publishing is the best model that enables African scholarship to be available both at home and abroad.

- 2) Secondly, there is a need to review the accreditation, rating and subsidization of scholarly books. Surely scholarly books (and not textbooks) especially in the humanities and social sciences are more valuable than journal articles. The subsidies accruing from scholarly books could be used to underwrite the production of such books.

- 3) Thirdly, there is a need to increase library funding which has for years been the cornerstone of scholarly books. Scholarly books are not only invaluable as disseminators of knowledge but are crucial for the building of a solid higher education landscape in Africa
- 4) Fourthly, we need to transform the parlous state of book distribution and provisioning in Africa. We need to transcend the preponderance of relying on education publishing.
- 5) Fifthly and lastly, we need to strive for economic development because scholarly publishing can only thrive in a stable political and economic environment.

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## **Appendix A:**

### **Members of the American University Press Association**

Abilene Christian University Press  
Akron: The University of Akron Press  
Alabama: The University of Alabama Press  
Alaska: University of Alaska Press  
Alberta: The University of Alberta Press  
American Historical Association  
American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc.  
American School of Classical Studies at Athens  
American University in Cairo Press  
Amsterdam University Press  
Arizona: The University of Arizona Press  
Arkansas: The University of Arkansas Press  
Athabasca University Press  
Baylor University Press  
Beacon Press  
British Columbia: University of British Columbia Press  
Brookings Institution Press  
Calgary: University of Calgary Press  
California: University of California Press  
Cambridge University Press  
Carnegie Mellon University Press  
Catholic University: The Catholic University of America Press  
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press  
Chinese University: The Chinese University Press  
Colorado: University Press of Colorado  
Columbia University Press  
Cork University Press  
Cornell University Press  
Duke University Press  
Dumbarton Oaks  
Duquesne University Press  
Eastern Washington University Press  
Florida: University Press of Florida  
Fordham University Press  
Gallaudet University Press  
Georgetown University Press  
Georgia: University of Georgia Press  
Getty Publications  
Harvard University Press  
Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press  
Hong Kong University Press

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Howard University Press  
Illinois: University of Illinois Press  
Indiana University Press  
Iowa: University of Iowa Press  
Island Press  
Jewish: The Jewish Publication Society  
Johns Hopkins: The Johns Hopkins University Press  
Kansas: University Press of Kansas  
Kent: The Kent State University Press  
Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky  
Leuven University Press  
Louisiana State University Press  
McGill-Queen's University Press  
Marquette University Press  
Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press  
MIT: The MIT Press  
Mercer University Press  
Michigan: The University of Michigan Press  
Michigan State University Press  
Minnesota Historical Society Press  
Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press  
Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi  
Missouri: University of Missouri Press  
Modern Language Association  
Museum of Modern Art  
National Academies Press  
National Gallery of Art  
Naval Institute Press  
Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press  
Nevada: University of Nevada Press  
New England: University Press of New England  
New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press  
New York University Press  
North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press  
North Texas: University of North Texas Press  
Northern Illinois University Press  
North-western University Press  
Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press  
Ohio University Press  
Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press  
Oregon State University Press  
Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press  
Oxford University Press  
Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press  
Pennsylvania State: The Pennsylvania State University Press  
Pisa: Edizioni Plus - Pisa University  
Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press



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Princeton University Press  
Puerto Rico: University of Puerto Rico Press  
Purdue University Press  
RAND  
Resources for the Future/RFF Press  
Rice University Press  
RIT Cary Graphic Arts Press  
Rochester: University of Rochester Press  
Rockefeller: The Rockefeller University Press  
Russell Sage Foundation  
Rutgers University Press  
Society of Biblical Literature  
South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press  
Southern Illinois University Press  
Southern Methodist University Press  
Stanford University Press  
State University of New York Press  
Syracuse University Press  
Teachers College Press  
Temple University Press  
Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press  
Texas: University of Texas Press  
Texas A&M University Press  
Texas Christian University Press  
Texas Tech University Press  
Texas Western Press  
Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press [English Catalogue]  
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Inc.  
United Nations University Press  
United States Institute of Peace  
Upjohn Institute: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research  
Urban: The Urban Institute  
Utah: University of Utah Press  
Utah State University Press  
Vanderbilt University Press  
Virginia: The University of Virginia Press  
Washington: University of Washington Press  
Washington State University Press  
Wayne State University Press  
Wesleyan University Press  
West Indies: University of the West Indies Press  
West Virginia University Press  
Wilfrid Laurier University Press  
Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press  
Woodrow Wilson: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press  
Yale University Press